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Alexander S. Balogh, B.A., M.A.

An Abstract Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
Lindenwood University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Writing

Abstract

This collection of poems is written in free-verse style and, taken together, explores themes of the individual's place in contemporary American society. Its subjects range from money-grubbing, bottom-line oriented cemetery owners to the joys of the Fender bass guitar — the prototypical American bass.

The author has been influenced since he began reading poetry in earnest more than 40 years ago by the spirit, immediacy, and honest, playful rendering of the world of the Beat poets. Although none of the poems here are a conscious attempt to mimic their style (in fact, just the opposite — an attempt has been made to incorporate the best of the voicings of other periods and styles) — I would not have become a poet were it not for these intrepid literary beacons.

This collection also includes an introduction which explores the nature and value of poetry, and how the craft is frequently approached by MFA students, and suggests that the very act of writing poetry is as important as — and often more important than — the final product itself.

& Yet

Alexander S. Balogh, B.A., M.A.

A Culminating Project Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
Lindenwood University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Writing
2009

COMMITTEE IN CHARGE OF CANDIDACY :

Professor Michael Castro, Chairperson and Advisor

Assistant Professor Eve Jones

DEDICATION:

To Michael Castro & Eve Jones

... & as always, to my life partner, *mi vida y mi media naranja*:

María Teresa — *Tú eres mi otro yo.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

These poems have appeared in the following publications:

- *Untamed Ink*: “Every Generation Has Them” and “Trinkets,” May 2008
- *Literal Chaos*: “View From Max’s Tavern,” November 2008
- *Mid Rivers Review*: “Peruanita” and “For You,” April 2009

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& YET

INTRODUCTION

I wrote all of the poems in this collection during my time in Lindenwood University's MFA program, with the exception of several, which I used as part of my application portfolio. These have been significantly revised during the program.

But what is more important than the poems themselves, is poetry itself and the poet's relationship to it. Lindenwood's MFA in Writing program is relatively unselective, admitting almost all applicants, and does not require its students to commit to a single discipline, such as poetry or short fiction. Therefore, many of its students find themselves in poetry classes, never having written poetry or even having read much. They don't consider themselves poets with a capital P, and they approach poetry naively, with emotions ranging from indifference to awe. And their writing is good. That is, they dig into themselves and put on paper something real, authentic. Their initial workshop drafts are often artless and cliché-ridden. But this doesn't matter. What matters is the act of creation, the poet's earnestness and desire to share something meaningful of themselves, something bringing new understandings, offering epiphanies, perceptions, or even pronouncements.

But what is most important throughout this process is these fledgling poets' relationships to their own work — They care deeply, they are eager for acceptance, to create a “good” poem. What is lacking, mostly is the craft, & yet — by the act of creation, these writers put their minds to eternity, their pens to paper and go for it.

Then one laboriously learns the craft. For years I have studied poetry on my own, written some, and certainly, I have fancied myself a poet while seeking an imagined poet's life more than the poems themselves. Sitting in the Cafe Michelikov in Crakow, sipping a strong coffee, scribbling in pencil in a pocket notebook — it didn't get any better than that. Which bring us to the fundamental questions of what poetry is, what it means to be a poet, what is the role of poetry, and who cares, anyway?

To identify oneself as a poet takes *cojones* and self confidence. There is no money in poetry, more indifference than glory, and it means going public with one's work, suffering the rejection of small presses and the scrutiny of other poets. Being a poet is an identity, a way of life, a way of perceiving the world. To be a poet is to be an outsider, because any artist must be on the outside of society to accurately view and render it. The act of creation is important, perhaps more so than the product. To create a thing of beauty is the goal, something as beautiful as a banjo roll or a bird song. To be a poet is to create a work of art with words as the medium. In a larger sense, the medium, the poem, *is* the message.

Or perhaps the act of creation is the message. All poets in the act of creation are connected — or rather disconnected — from the power grid of society, the

juice that drains originality, and demands conformity and consumption. These scribblers labor on their own pyramids, with their own secret passages. Perhaps the anonymous scribblers are the most revolutionary — and there are many. Unpublished widely, no audience or sense of audience, writing because... even they themselves can't say why — Because they must? They would go crazy otherwise?

& yet, I do not create for creation's sake. I create to reach the reader, to on some level blow out the doors and windows of his¹ mind, to leave him or his perceptions changed irrevocably, irreparably — or at least for a moment. Or perhaps to place a seed in his brain's fertility to bear hybrid blooms or to decay and become mulch for future poetic incursions.

To be a poet takes commitment. It is not enough to have written ten poems in ten years, no matter how good they are. One must be prolific, create and continue to produce a body of work. I did not identify myself as a poet until I had established an output averaging a poem a week for a year. I did not set out to do this, but rather I looked at my portfolio and realized not only that I had created a substantial body of work, but also that I would continue to add to it.

I credit my formal study of poetry for this.

With the proliferation of MFA programs, they have become maligned as greenhouses for writers to develop academic roots, as places to make business

¹ The English language lacks a gender-neutral third-person-singular pronoun.

connections in the most selective, most well endowed of them, or as great homogenizers of prose and poetic styles.

But the program at Lindenwood is egalitarian, accepting just about all applicants (sorry, genre writers), providing a fertile environment for, say, people who have never seriously written a poem to explore that aspect of writing, and to be taken seriously. There are more middle-aged dabblers than young hotshots. The tenderness they feel toward their own work, the hopefulness with which they offer it up in workshop, the sincerity of the emotions, the depths to which they burrow into their souls, shine a light and let us peer in, can't be bought, sold, or stamped with a bar code.

Perhaps this is why genre writers are shut out of MFA programs. The perception is that plot-driven money lust is valued above the pure desire to create something true, of worth, but of no possible value to the marketplace of commerce, only to the marketplace of ideas.

The clichés, and lack of background or craft are something all well-known poets have overcome. When one chooses to become a painter, one seriously studies painting; when one chooses to become a musician, one seriously studies music. However, by virtue of having acquired perfect command of the language at a young age, many would-be writers are not as diligent in their study of the written word. But, to paraphrase Thomas Mann: A writer is one to whom writing does not come as easily as it does to most other people. So we study as best we can.

But for the reader, what is important is not the poets' drafts, or which poets inspired the writer, but rather how he or she approaches the poets one does read, the words on a page, changing with the reader, the time of day or that certain slant of light. For all of us, I think, our earliest memorable reads were the poets and poems we could understand, that grabbed us by the collar & pulled us in close enough to smell their breath. For me that was Gregory Corso, Allen Ginsberg, Charles Bukowski, William Carlos Williams, or any book with the *City Lights* imprimatur. Even when these poets were tendering surrealist images, on some level they made sense to me. They were real. Authentic. They rang true. They needed no translation. Unlike the poets thrown up at us in high school: constricted, veiled, indirect... well behaved. Poems that I now appreciate, but their inclusion seemed designed more to create "well-rounded" textbooks with representation of the major periods, chosen to appeal more to textbook adoption committees, than to connect with our young minds. I did not "appreciate" the first poetry, the "Beat"² poetry, that connected with me either. It spoke to me viscerally, with immediacy. It grabbed me by the brain stem and wouldn't let go. It was only much later that I appreciated the poets' craft. I try today to retain that immediacy in my own work.

At this stage in my development, perhaps more important than poems on pages is my interaction with well-known contemporary poets such as Jack

² Today many acolytes of the Beats, as well as the few remaining original Beats themselves claim this term has become a distorted cliché. "What Beats? We were all friends. That's all," David Meltzer said to me, perhaps disingenuously, but clearly irritated by the oversimplification and commodification of his body of work.

Hirschman, David Meltzer, and Michael Rothenberg, among others, both personally and as editor of a literary journal.

Poets of this stature have no need to publish in small-circulation journals & yet they not only responded to my requests for their work — new work, unpublished anywhere, to be seen in print for the first time in my journal — but they were gracious and friendly and they sent good stuff. Hirschman, recent poet laureate of San Francisco and author of what must now be more than 100 books of poems and translations, sent me some of his most recent work after only corresponding with me through e-mail. Rothenberg accepted my edits on his poems and thanked me for the suggestions, even apologizing for obvious goofs that I had spotted. He is also a poetry editor for Penguin books, and our line-level and design discussions about his work became a master class in editing for me. Meltzer summed up the attitudes of the greats with the words “Use what’s useful,” trusting me with (at the moment he sent it) his most recent communiqué to the world, and later discussing potential edits. At one point he told me, “It’s yours to edit,” which is akin to a great architect allowing an unfledged, untried laborer to landscape his creation however he sees fit. (To be fair, later when he had time to digest my edits, he told me his preferences, using phrases such as “is it possible to” and “could you,” rather than dictatorially imposing his vision.)

These experiences made me feel part of the poetic community. Or *tribe*, perhaps, as poet Michael Castro suggests. & now that I have been initiated & bound by the blood of ink, an adopted neophyte whose own writing now connects with and extends a larger body of work, I write no longer in isolation, but as a

contributor in something greater, something which will be slowly revealed throughout my own writing life.

So, perhaps it is not the poems themselves that matter, nor the act of their creation, but rather their catalytic action upon both the poet and the readers.

Welcome, dear readers, to these passages.

EVERY GENERATION HAS THEM

its dreamers lost
not fitting
any mold,
knowing that
there's some place out there
for them,
but not knowing
where or even where
to start looking
They start out
understanding only that they need to be
somewhere else
Different: not a cog,
a machinist, engineer or even overseer
in the low-budget air-conditioned strip mall franchise
with its own uniforms, hygiene checklists,
pre-measured serving sizes, home offices
and customer satisfaction polls
Not like the others
who fit in naturally, or learn quickly to conform,
not seeking seeing needing or wanting other options
But those truly not fitting,
knowing this at an early age:
volunteer self transplants now rootless
O Creative Wayfarers!
Impolite expatriates of polite society
Which of you will wake up one day
with suburban spouses, children
Commuters buying the American Dream
on installments unplanned
wondering why
you took the hard road
only to end up here with me

FREE BEER TOMORROW

the sign above the bar reads
 but tomorrow never comes.
 "I've forgotten more than you'll ever know
 about her," the country singer croons
 but that's OK —
 you have the memory that you've forgotten
 — I have her.

Be Here Now the Buddhist scriptures tell us
 but I've got no other place to be.

Here is all there is
 So why do we
 fixate
 on the past,
 trying to remember
 to not forget

...what?

*Gossamer ships
 in the midst of gray matter
 Vapor trails
 As real, as
 true
 as we believe them to be*

& yet
 we are who we were
 and I am a little less me
 without the memory of you.

BIG BEAT JOY

For David Meltzer

You grin like the hep cat who ate a thousand canaries
 A skinny Buddha bemused by all the attention
 Walking cane, orthopedic shoes, bones brittle
 You flirt from the stage — Hi, how ya doin'? you mouth and wave
 One hand clapping at a woman 25 years your junior who catches your eye.

Before the reading

Two teens thought you and some other guy were drunken bums and accidentally
 almost ran you over at the Quick Trip, then were surprised to see you &
 Rothenberg

on stage with your gas station coffees.

I wanted to pack the room for you.

My students wanted extra points.

"That extra-credit thing," they called it, saving face.

Never on their own would they attend a poetry reading.

Then you spoke.

They all loved you. That voice. Never heard anything like it.

"Technicolor movies are like acid trip — you know what I'm saying.

Oh.

Maybe you don't," you sd. You cracked them up.

"So *that's* the beats," they marveled, awakening their own inner be-attitudes.

I don't want to take a trip down memory lane, you sd later that night

the guest of honor at a table full of poets,

but Dylan asked me to read at the *Last Waltz* — You know,

in that voice of his — 'C'mon, Meltzer — You know you want t do it.'

No, I sd, I don't. I don't want to be an intermission act when everyone

leaves to get food. Ferlinghetti'll do it.

Kills bugs dead, you sd out of nowhere

as if it were the greatest line you'd ever heard.

Kills bugs dead, you sd again.

That's Lew Welsh's line, you sd. He wrote it when he wasn't making any money
 as a poet and was writing ad copy while studying linguistics.

Kills.

Bugs.

Dead.

I'm the last one left, you confided.

I can say anything — even if I wasn't there...

Who's to know?

But you wouldn't prank us.

— Would you?

"To death!" you toasted, with a wine-filled fruit jar.
"To death!" we repeated one by one, the metaphors beginning to fly —
"To the final frontier"... "To the void beyond this void"...
"But may it not come too soon," I said, clinking your glass.

You in satori here beside us, your Selected Poems recently published
You whittled it down to 268 pages, a number you yourself came up with
despite unlimited space, refusing all entreaties
for your Collected Works — all 800+ pages.
David's Copy it's called. You took my pen, opened yr book to the title page,
scratched some and handed it back to me — *Alex's Copy* it now reads.
You're not done with us yet,
not ready to be collected,
you didn't have to say.

ELECTION DAY

Pull the lever
And tremble

WHY I HAVEN'T CAST A BALLOT SINCE THE THIRD GRADE

The girls went first
The boys were to vote on their favorite doll
The boys up next week
with their own plastic models.

A single Ken amidst the Barbies
caught all the boys' eyes
"We're voting for Ken!"
we shouted in unison
A candidate we could support
Perhaps he's a ball player or a race car driver
or G.I. Joe's brother, too young yet to enlist.

"No," said the teacher, fearing a landslide —
"Ken is off the ballot."

Now I didn't know who to vote for
They all looked the same
Glittery, frilly... silly
Their nuances lost on my eight-year-old senses.

Not Voting I scrawled tentatively
on my looseleaf ballot
at the last moment
No other clear choice
Is there an *e* in *voteing*? I wondered
Perhaps I should write *I abstain*, I thought
but this subtle dodge of senators and congressmen
sounded too abrupt, too stilted.

The teacher meticulously unfolded and tallied ballots
for myriad Barbies, a Stacie or two, a Midge perhaps
"Malibu Barbie, Malibu Barbie, Stacie...
Who wrote *Not Voting*?" she exclaimed.

"I did," my hand immediately raised,
thinking she was going to correct my spelling
I had been — after all —
agonizing over this, no dictionary at hand.

“Well — No one can vote for *your* model next week.
Everyone *must* vote.”

Next week the Chevys, Mustangs,
conversion vans, Woodies rolled out—
as indistinguishable to the girls
as the accessorized Barbies were to us.

I displayed my monster models,
contemptuous of the table full of cars — never my thing
Not even a Batmobile among them!

The girls oohed aaahed caressed
my Dracula with cape interior sprayed red
Mummy with real cloth bandages dripping
Creature from the Black Lagoon looking forlorn...

“*Who brought these?*”
the teacher said, eyes as wide as the third-grade girls’
“*I did,*” I said, my hand raised again
“Well...” she said softly,
“I’m sorry, but we did talk about this last week.”

ODE TO THE FENDER BASS

All hail
 The Torah of Tone
 The Sacrament of Sound
 The Kabalah of Kronk
 The Shiva of Sidemen
 The God of the God of Thunder
 The Gibraltar of Rock
 The Sound that Silences
 The King James Version of the Deep End
 We take you literally —
 O Bottom Line

Your ash or alder bodies dazzle
 Concert goers and musicians alike
 Shaved and sanded front and back
 To better fit our flesh
 Buffed to a gloss
 In three-tone sunburst, two-tone tobacco,
 Candy cola, olympic white,
 Black, placid blue,
 Silver, gold sparkle or custom colors
 Not enough to satisfy our mod lust
 We refinish, overspray, or even leave you stripped
 Bolt on your neck —
 Maple for the thump
 Rosewood for the grind
 Tapered to Precision

We caress you with calloused fingers
 Nothing fancy here
 A second pickup adds Jazz
 Active or passive
 We dial in our personal preferences
 With Rotosounds and flatwounds

Your bridges, too, rudimentary
 Even with Badass improvements thru the years
 Naked
 Covered in modesty on early versions
 We impetuous voyeurs
 Of your rudimentary saddle
 Pulled them off in the heat of sonic assault and
 Used them as makeshift ashtrays
 Defiled your factory freshness

But you improve with age
 Your body banged
 Frozen thawed
 Broiled nightly
 Jaco himself dominated you —
 Left your
 Frets ripped
 Pickups loose
 Finish stripped

Macca paid homage to you —
 with a right-handed Jazz restrung
 flipped over for “Band on the Run”
 Its clean mellifluousness rendering his Höfners and Rics
 Mere muddy thumps and plunk
 Despite Beatlesque innovations and harmonies

Jazz Motown
 Soul Rock
 Blues Punk
 Pop Country
 Surf Psychobilly —
 All default to your
 Heavy Metal Thunder

O Fender!
 Lowest common denominator —
 You acknowledge no boundaries
 You get to the bottom of it all.

ODE TO THE LITER BOTTLE

Head rising
natural carbonation
accumulating
with each
swig
Hail to Thee Blithe Spirit!
Who dares pour your amber essence
into freezing glass?
or drain you
into frosted
big-mouthed receptacle
sweating from contact
inviting gulps
No viewing label
or froth thru shapely tint
Transparent pint-sized glass
dilutes what should not be
poured from Thee
— O Mundane Chalice —
into anything
but our mouths.

ODE TO THE SPARROW

Five, six, seven,
 nine,
 thirteen...
 line up for their turn
 on my backyard feeder
 Some on a nearby branch
 All patient
 All polite

No other species present
 post dusk
 other birds call through distance
 fed earlier perhaps
 at same station
 now humble wings
 rest in abeyance
 their turn
 to nibble at leisure

•

If no sparrow falls to the ground apart from the will of God
 Never have I felt so much His instrument
 I support the unobtrusive passerines
 They will not fall hungry in my presence

Indigenous to five continents
 Peaceful, patient, sharing, protective
 Perhaps they are God's prototypical creatures
 More beloved to Him than greedy man, hoarding squirrels
 or the brazen sun

•

 now
 gone
 Sparrows
 Bellies sated

Another day will return
 with
 the cacophony of scrub jays
 clamoring robins blackbirds and others

O Sparrows!
 I await your calming return

PERUANITA

Your bronze arms,
the arms of Cusco,
reach out to embrace this new land
your feet now walk upon

Your eyes rich and dark
as the soil of your homeland
Eyes of your grandmother
Heart longing for refuge

And you —
Have you so quickly forgotten
the tongue of your people,
the fricatives of the mountain trails,
the clipped vowels of the vendors in your oceanic streets?

Is this the life you imagined?
Asphalt city prices factory labor wages
Loveless marriage
entered into for fresh identity
After this — what?
Who are you with your new name
your social insecurity & bar-coded license?

You say you fought oppression
almost certain death
waylaying trucks
Your body — one among others — a roadblock
of flesh desperation and bone
Not for political agenda
but to hijack canned milk for your babies' mouths
A rebel pursued,
facing almost certain death

Embody now the spirit that forced you
to flee your homeland
Pry yourself from your suburban manor
Your piece of the pie,
a bounty costing more than a lifetime
of wages across the border
As you tread this new shining path
where darkness masquerades as light.

TRINKETS

You express your tropical charms
 in plastic beads
 with no intrinsic value.

Jewelers who work in gold
 — an easy element that crafts itself —
 make all its renderings worth their weight.

So much harder
 to engage the eye
 with just form and fiber
 to create value in shimmering nuance

unexpressible

hypnotic

oceanic

harmonic

Blue Green Turquoise Tortoise
 Tangerine Orange Mango
 Ruby Red Cranberry

Who's to capture the kaleidoscope in these faux names?

Trinkets for sale
 to anyone everyone :

Tourists snap them up
 for a cheap affair with local color
 only to lie forgotten in drawers back home
 Your spirit
 in each
 threading
 & knot.

NAKED

Naked like a uniform
 No pockets to fill
 or be empty
 No watch no rings
 no shoes no marks
 of distinction
 Only skin & hair
 Flesh wrapper
 covering bone
 & consciousness

The great equalizer :
 Naked at birth
 Naked before death.

THE CHEAPEST BLENDER

Let's see what the cheapest will buy —
 Plastic, but lack of glass was
 not the problem.
 Six bucks less.
 A more expensive one shot
 Not three years old
 Replacement parts cost more than the whole

Which is why we're here
 Comparing Osterizers
 Weighing Hamilton Beaches

Why pay more
 for a utilitarian item
 that slices dices whips
 chops purees and blends its way
 to the junk heap anyhow?

THE REVOLUTION COMES FULL CIRCLE

Monks took acid
and saw God
Hell's Angels took acid
and beat civilians
with pool cues

Who knew we would change so little

BY ERROR HE SD...

By error
He sd
I'll push forward
By error
He sd
I'll rush backward
By error
He sd
I'll leave a mark

ALL ABOARD

Are you
in or out
and how do you know?
This vagary
seeking documentation
Border lines
Passwords
Handshakes on the sly
Hand jive in plain view
Dead drops in suburbia
Hand-sewn escape hatches in floorboards
Down and dirty
In the hole
Are you
on the bus
or staying put :
... and how can you be so sure?

FOR YOU

I give my life for you
 All my coulda beens
 Woulda beens
 Shoulda sees
 Coulda scenes
 The children I'll never have
 The book I'll never write
 The house in the suburbs
 with the attached two-car garage and automatic door openers
 The car itself (a Volvo perhaps)
 My summer session in Paris
 My career as an anthropologist, linguist, tenured academic
 or a machine operator pressing plastic in a plastics plant or
 chucking the morning paper thru a pickup window at dawn
 For you I'm that clerk at the SuperCenter
 Gladly I stock shelves with you in my membrain
 My jailer
 My healer
 The key to my cell
 The key to my self
 My cell
 You are in my veins
 in my veins
 in my veins
 In a bottle in a glass in a pipe
 rolled in paper asleep in my bed
 sweet in my head in my
 eyes telling lies whispering truths
 sweet nothings nothing sweet
 You are mine and mine alone
 You are my muse my music
 my muse sick with envy
 Flowing flowing rowing rowing
 sowing sowing towing towing
 shedding dis content this content-
 ment. I'll never leave you
 I'll never go

FATAL

Four patrols
 lights flashing
Two engines
 lanes blocked
 Hood folded into windshield
Another vehicle
 impossibly poised on side
Advanced life support unit
 Idle
Medics direct traffic
 or stand erect
 waiting

Further down the road
a fender bender:
such consternation here.

WE DON'T OFTEN THINK

of cemeteries changing hands
Under new management
Grass unmanicured
Broadleaf weeds puncturing the rye
Crypts crumbling along with
the mothers fathers brothers lovers they contain
A business pushing pre-need plots on grieving kin
Upselling with today-only discounts
before the dirt and estates have settled
Do the dead unquietly slumber here
amidst this decay and money changing?
Do decomposing spouses lament
that their freshly interred loved ones must
settle in such unforeseen squalor?
Does the dearly departed wife
silently curse the husband
again by her side — now for eternity
Living frugally in life
she had hoped for better in death

And what of these mourners
amidst this decay?
Lamenting not death and loss
but silently plotting their own cremations
& ash scatterings

FORGIVE ME FATHER

for wishing it was you who'd died,
 receiving the call.
 "Prepare yourself for the worst," they sd.
 I thought it was *you*.
 Your death would have been no tragedy.
 Crippled by disease, yr belly fat
 hands twitching
 living on television, doctors' orders and grace
 numb already
 Yr manly pride obdurate
 intact through all those years

Papá — you're still here —
 visiting mamás grave
 ... as slyly as you visited yr other women
 those other women
 and other bad decisions
 uprootings
 trickling away accumulating wealth
 yr gravest mistake — not listening
 to mamá who knew better
 Leaving her
 alone
 wanting
 no man, not even you.
 Sharing with you her roof
 but not her bed
 in your dotage

Now in the ground
 she's the only one left for you.
 All others renounced,
 you steal to her grave in silence

Eyes dry, I know the worst *has* happened.
 I wished you were the one dead

& yet,
 I never knew how much I loved you until now
 as I watch you bear your remains

SOME GUYS HAVE ALL THE LUCK, I THOUGHT

I'm digging to his house on the hill
 on the outskirts of town
 Me, a pick-up laborer
 This, not my first ditch
 Shoveling for my daily bread
 Hoping it will last a few days
 Thinking what do I need to do
 to get *that*.

Tasseled loafers, argyles, starched white shirt
 inspect my work
 (They all look good to me right now)
 Resting on my shovel
 I ask: How did you become an optometrist?
 "I couldn't get into med school
 and I couldn't get into dental school
 so I became an optometrist.
 Stop by my office next week
 and I'll adjust those glasses for you."

RESPONSE TO DK'S REMARK THAT HE SEEMED DESTINED TO DATE ONLY CRAZY WOMEN

Distressed,
 yes.
 But nevertheless
 I must confess
 that undressed —
 they're the ones
 I like best.

SHE WANTS TO KISS ME...

She wants to kiss me,
arms outstretched,
eyes focused on me.
But I don't know you well enough.
We've barely met,
not even introduced,
not five minutes in the same room.
I'll probably never see you again.
Why do I attract you creatures?
I lean in, my sandpaper cheek
brushed by the softest lips I can remember.
My first such kiss in years
What do you see in me?
You still in your mother's arms,
unable to speak,
and me uncertain
with none of my own.

TEENAGE GIRLS PREPARE FOR SAUNA

Slipping out of trunks
to bikini bottoms
Breasts too small
for so much belly roll
My dears:
at this age
you still look good

SELF PORTRAIT*For Bob Dylan*

Is that really you?
So primitively rendered
Head materializing on canvas
Eyes mismatched, only one pupil, turned inward
Hair like leaves changing color in autumn
Blue diamond nose off kilter like Eb⁷
Linseed oil wash reveals every broad stroke
Your name in CAPS on the gatefold spine
Picasso stoic in two dimensions

That's the shape of your face

It's still my favorite album
even though in your resurgence you repudiated it
calling it I don't care what

It ain't me you told us
It ain't me you're listening to

ETERNALLY HOMELESS

Twenty three addresses in ten years
 That in just one town, an extended college experience
 terminating in a degree —
 then off to San Diego, Tucson, Madison, Tulsa, Atlanta, Springfield
 and points between
 Each with at least one rented pad
 Caught breath in Chicago
 Three years there gainfully employed
 honing craft, not making ends meet
 in spite of the illegal basement conversion
 I bedded down in before
 bugging out for parts unknown

Gypsy blood, gypsy curse spanning generations
 Great grandfather in Brno lived in five countries, never moved once —
 His son he shuttled to America
 All downhill from there

My own brother, too, rootless
 never satisfied: Japan, Germany, Belgium, France, Holland,
 even Luxemburg not to his liking
 Nowhere in the States either
 despite repeated incursions
 to the land of our birth

But me — I'm a nester
 longing for hearth and stability
 Yet even with employment roots
 five houses owned in the past ten years
 Dotted lines signed and initialed
 Each meant to be the last

I'm the one harmed most, I suppose
 No anchor no one left behind
 Nothing to offer but moments
 Now, finally married 10 years to kindred transient
 Home is where we are
 No kin no offspring
 No holiday get togethers or cousins at the table

Maybe it's for the best
 No permanent harm done
 They've all forgotten me long ago
 No cards no photos no letters
 Name not even entered into phone list for inevitable deletion

Down the road ...
 ... ashes scattered into Oregon Pacific
 to float out with the tide
 as my sojourning spirit continues its gypsy journey

BASIC NATURE

s a l t
 w i n d
 w a t e r
 e a r t h
 crash together
 smooth rocks
 form churns
 sea
 forms
 now here
 now remember
 no form before existence
 forsee
 no other
 form ...
 only this form
 here now
 nothing more

HIGH TIDE AT LINCOLN BEACH

Surf and wind
sound like rain
distant traffic

Incessant lullaby
of
the
ocean
returns
to swallow
boulders & tidepools

Children scream in the motel pool
so
far
away

VIEW FROM MAX'S TAVERN

Sprinkler like a showerhead
 Streaming over the entrance
 Reminds passersby of where
 they are, Eugene.
 Rainy ambiance never far
 Even in record-breaking swelter
 No AC inside
 Organic visionary,
 sun tattooed back,
 meant for others to see:
 A brotherhood of humanity
 holding hands.
 Ancient cyclist shimmers
 in full regalia
 Mirrored velvet top hat on a
 day like this.
 Freaks all
 in downtown oasis
 Blue-collar skill-set
 further West
 Reality does not coexist
 in this hate-free zone
 True believers
 can't live like this
 anywhere else
 Not gentrified yet
 Two lavender womyn stroll by
 Unsubversive
 Tourists do double take at the
 false showers
 "Is it raining over there?"
 mocks the bartender in
 flowering sundress
 Bicyclist stops
 beneath the sprinkler —
 Not a hallucination
 Unbidden, smokers take smoke
 outside
 Orbit bar
 twirl through drops
 Skeletal gypsy

<no stanza break>

black bandana, grey beard
sits at bar, embellishes MP3s
with intermittent harp
Bartender floats thru heat,
serves sweaty pitcher to booth
No empty seats left...
Time to get into the rain myself

BORING, OREGON

Rain falls
Grass grows
Spring becomes summer

Rain falls
Grass grows
Summer becomes autumn

Rain falls
Doug firs and Scotch pines remain green
Autumn becomes winter

Rain falls
Firewood gathered and stacked
Winter becomes spring

Rain falls
Grass grows
Aaah...

FELLOW LABORER

For Jack Hirschman

Street poet
laureate of San Francisco
you offer *The Peoples Tribune*
for change,
sell yr priceless
chapbooks on line
to stave off the
roar of punchclocks
after quickly
bugging out
of academia
You know your value
but you value
the daily workers more,
mutely towing the lines
fearing layoffs
and sensing American
dreams evaporating
as kids rattle and spouses
slowly shrug — their lots
cast together for life
or wherever life takes them
as you dole out pages
to awaken even us,
we, your suburban readers,
who can afford to hang
on yr every word.

A POEM SHOULD BE...

A poem should be about something, he sd
It must have meaning
Every line must make sense
Not at first, maybe
It can reveal slowly
But meaning must be in there throughout

No ambiguous couplets
No forced rhymes
If not right the first time
Set it aside
Let it breathe
Let it bake
Delete the reprobate
Let the fake evaporate

To TF

So, you wanted to
sit up nights and
write poetry at
a roll-top desk somewhere
in an old Victorian house.

Sometimes I see you there
and I believe you
wouldn't like it very much.

WITH SO MANY BREATHS LEFT

It's time to go. The calendar
 summons from a rusted nail.
I am fertile, my mind winks.
 I catch only fragments
 Guttural spittal and meaningless sibilants
 Never the full story
 or even a first couplet.

Bus stop crowded at midnight
 Waiting for the voyage, volunteer indigents
 cram into line.

I stand with them,
 crazy now I know.

What some found in ticket stubs
 I found in the wind. What some found
 in manicured shrubs, I found abandoned.
 Easy now I know, but then no guide.

Bushels of fruit rotting in plain view
 "Pick as much as you like,"
 shrugs the owner dismissively
 as I tender a portion of his neglected bounty.

Stay here now, say my feet planted
 in this plum grove
 a sudden détente—

No going back anymore
 no remaining still
 here
 with so many breaths left.

WE ALL HAVE A WAY

Response to LC

We all
have a way
to further
the revolution

This is mine

Vita Auctores

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